FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

September 20, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Hosea 11:1-11
Luke 15:1-10

"How can I give you up?...My heart recoils...;my compassion grows warm and tender." -Hosea 11:8 (NRSV)

His father died when he was nine years old. Before that time the young boy, Gerald G. May, now a practicing psychiatrist and professor, was traditionally and comfortably at home with religious faith. He prayed to God and experienced childlike awe and reverence and wonder. God, he says, was his friend. And then the bottom dropped out. His father died. May had expected that God would prevent things like that from happening or, at least do something about it - keep him somehow in touch with his father, for instance. And when it didn't occur, when the reality and enormity of the loss settled in, the nine-year-old chose, he says, to dispense with God. "I would take care of myself. I would go it alone... Just as my father faded from my awareness, so did God, and so did my desire for God."

But that's not the end of the story. In college, he fell in love with literature and philosophy, went to church on occasion out of habit or curiosity, but without much meaning or satisfaction. In Medical School he tried to make a god out of science. And after a tour of duty in the Air Force in Vietnam, he returned to his medical practice, mainly dealing with alcohol and drug addiction.

He noted quickly what practitioners in the field of addiction all know and that is that the going is very tough, that there are no quick or easy fixes, that addiction is not a superficial matter but comes from somewhere deep inside, and consequently people who recover, more often than not, do so as a result of some kind of deeply spiritual experience. Even if the language is not traditional, May concluded, recovery was a "turning to God."

As a result of that discovery he began to re-explore his own spiritual experience, his early decision that he could go it

alone, but he also was able to identify another motif - a life-long fascination with art, with philosophy, with anything related to transcendence and spirituality. He was, he says, looking for something, longing for something, yearning for something which was absent from his life.

And that is when he comes to the notion that I find so intriguing: I have printed it on the bulletin cover.

> "I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God. Whether we are consciously religious or not, this desire is our deepest longing and our most precious treasure. Regardless of how we describe it, it is a longing for love. It is a hunger to love, to be loved, to move closer to the Source of love. This yearning is the essence of the human spirit." [Addiction and Grace, p. 1]

Now that is a bold theological assertion. Our deepest yearning is for God - the source of love. It is of the essence of our humanness to love and to be loved and God has created us that way!

If that is true, why isn't everybody happily religious? Why isn't everybody a contented, trusting, joyful person of faith? What happens? Like Gerald May, life disappoints us; hurt, anger, resentment, fear cause us to repress our basic longing for God or to turn it elsewhere - addiction, for instance, which May defines as attachment to, bondage to, enslavement to things, people, ideas which restrict our freedom and our ability to love and to be loved. That is, replacements for God, and for the longing, yearning for God that is part of our basic humanity.

That God creates us for love - that God's basic disposition toward us is love, that God's ongoing relationship with us is fundamentally to woo us, to pursue us, to gently persuade us to live in love with God and with one another - is not the oldest religious idea in the world but it may be the boldest.

The oldest idea is that God creates us to be subjects who will obey and who will reap God's anger and wrath when we do not obey. The ancient religions of the world postulate god or gods who make rules and punish people with droughts, floods, plagues and military defeats when the rules are broken. It is not the whole story, but there is about the ancient religion of Israel, a little of that. The God of the Pentateuch can be described as a God of unyielding legalistic justice.

But that is not the whole story. There is another motif in our oldest scriptures. Like the counterpoint in a complex Bach fugue - this is a lovely counter melody which is necessary if we

are to hear the entire piece. This motif is unique and revolutionary and bold. It is that the God who creates and makes rules, also loves: that God wants not only obedient people but loving people who will reflect divine love in their common life... that God wants more than obedience... God wants a relationship, a covenant, a reunion, a reconciliation.

And the ancient voice who perhaps best presents this radical and subversive notion is the prophet Hosea, a fascinating character. Let me tell you a bit about him. He lived in the Eighth Century B.C. He was a farmer, a baker, a husband and father of three children. He not only had fallen in love with a woman with a shady reputation, he was convinced that God wanted him to marry her. So he did. Sometime after the birth of his third child, the bottom fell out for him. His wife left - ran off with another man and then another man and then another. The law was clear - the relationship was over. She was to be cast out forever. But Hosea didn't want to do it, couldn't do it. He still loved his wife. He was crushed, disappointed, devastated, but he made a radical, subversive decision. He would not do what the law - what common propriety, the Eighth Century version of "Family Values" dictated, what everybody assumed God expected in the name of traditional morality. Hosea decided to go after her with compassion, forgiveness and love - to win back his beloved. And that, Hosea had the temerity to announce, is precisely the way God deals with us. Some of the loveliest and most moving poetry in the Bible will be found in the words of this tragic but steadfast love, which has God saying things like - "How can I give you up? My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender," and portrays God like a parent, or grandparent, lifting an infant to her cheek.

The distinguished Jewish scholar and philosopher, the late Abraham Herschel, said it is the boldest religious concept in history - the "astonishing fact of God's love... a God whose basic and eternal disposition is love... a God of tenderness and mercy... a God with whom healing and reconciliation, not harm and destruction finally prevail." [The Prophets, Hosea, p. 44-49]

It is still a bold idea - a lovely idea. The 14th Century mystic, Meister Eckhardt, said that human beings are created out of the laughter of the Trinity. What a lovely thought. That there is divine laughter at our birth; that our creator is our gentle and loving source of being.

It is still a provocative and bold notion that there is something about God's love for us that is reflected in our love for God, or our yearning for God, or our resentment at God's disappointing us, or our anger at God's absence, or our emptiness because we concluded long ago that we have to take care of ourselves and to go it alone. The bold underpinning of Hosea's theology is that God's love for us is reflected in the human

heart in a longing for God, which often takes the form of a yearning for love.

Eight centuries after Hosea, Jesus returned to the topic. In an amazing sequence of stories he described a God who is absolutely committed to finding the lost; to bringing home the wandering sheep, to welcoming the wandering child. The setting of those stories is very important.

> "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the Scribes were grumbling and saying 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"
> [Luke 15:1, 2]

They were appalled that Jesus so freely associated with social and religious outcasts. And it was in response to their elitist, exclusive piety that he told the unforgettable stories about the shepherd who leaves his flock to go after one lost sheep, and the old woman who turned her house upside down and inside out to find one lost coin. (Can you imagine the raised eyebrows at that? "Did I hear right? Yahweh is an old woman?") And the third story, about a household and two sons - one of whom runs away from his parents' love and the other of whom stays home and allows resentment and anger to separate him from his parents' love.

"There is joy in heaven when one sinner repents - or is found - or returns home," Jesus told his proper and indignant audience. It is customary to assume that he was lecturing them - the Pharisees and Scribes - the religious folk: lecturing them on the topic of not excluding the sinners, the social outcasts, the ones who don't follow all the rules, obey all the laws, live quiet and socially acceptable lives. One wishes Pat Buchanan would spend some time reading Luke 15 before he declares, in the name of Christian religion, a "cultural war." One wishes Pat Robertson would consult Jesus on the topic of excluding people who disagree with his notions of morality. One has the sense that there is no room for the people Jesus spent most of his time with in the party, or - if I heard it right - in the political system.

The traditional interpretation was that the purpose of Jesus' stories about God's inclusive, pursuing love, was to persuade the Scribes and Pharisees to lighten-up, give the sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes a break, let them in the Kingdom theologically if not the Temple physically.

But now I believe the purpose of these wonderful stories was to break through to the Pharisees and Scribes, to tell them that God loved them, and that God's love wanted to find a home in their hearts, that God was pursuing them because <u>they</u> were lost,

they had replaced their own yearning for love with a poor substitute - religious zealotry, ideological and theological orthodoxy, religious and social propriety.

Gerald May argues that we have a way of dismissing our yearning for God and substituting instead other attachments. These attachments, he says, are addictions. They limit our freedom and our ability to love and to be loved. They become god for us. He writes:

> "I am not being flippant when I say that all of us suffer from addiction...the psychological, neurological, and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addiction are actively at work in every human being. The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, fantasies and an endless variety of other things... Addiction makes idolaters of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another." [p. 3, 4]

Wayne Oates has written very helpfully about a dynamic which is distressingly familiar - he calls "workaholism" addiction to work. In The Confessions of a Workaholic Oates speaks for many of us by revealing that he had trusted his work, his professional expertise, his physical strength, his ability to work longer and harder than anybody else, to make him happy, to bring him peace, to save his soul. And it doesn't work.

The message of faith is that the source of salvation - or, if you prefer, peace, fulfillment, joy - is God alone, that God is the source of love, that God loves you and wants you to trust that love, to live in that love, to answer that love, by loving God and by loving your neighbors.

The message of faith is that God wants you to say yes to something elemental about yourself, that you need and yearn for love, to be loved and to love. The message of faith is an invitation to claim your hunger, your longing, and not repress it or replace it.

It is not an insistence that you say words you do not mean, or claim to have experiences that you have not experienced. That's what makes many of us most uncomfortable with the "in your face - are you saved?" approach to evangelism. In a wonderful essay the late Joseph Sittler described his own discomfort when people started to talk about their private and powerful religious experiences. He wrote:

> "I have not seen any burning bushes... John Wesley's strangely warmed heart at Aldersgate Street - this is not my street... There is a precision that is born of knowledge... and there is a precision born of deprivation... just to hunger and thirst is a kind of negative benediction. Hunger, unabated, is a kind of testimony to the reality of food. To want to have may become a strange kind of having."
> [Grace Notes and Other Fragments, The View From Mt. Nebo, p. 147]

Perhaps you are somewhere in all of that.

Perhaps you were disappointed by loss or tragedy and decided long ago that you had to go it alone - but you continue to wonder.

Perhaps you keep flirting with faith, wanting to be brave and autonomous and self-reliant, but your heart stops unaccountably on occasion, and your breath quickens when you see beauty, or hear beauty and you find tears in your eyes and a lump in your throat when you hear a great hymn, or see a child's innocent trust, or watch with wonder, an act of human courage.

Perhaps you are addicted and know it, or more likely don't know it, except that you are working harder and harder, giving more of yourself, your health, your energy, your soul, your love, your relationship, and it doesn't feel right.

Or perhaps, like the Pharisees and Scribes, you are traditionally and comfortably religious, but without much passion.

Perhaps the only thing you know of the reality of God is a void, a felt incompleteness, and perhaps the only experience of love in your life is the palpable absence of love.

We are, all of us, the psychiatrist said, somewhere in that, and the first word to us is a good word, namely that the emptiness, the absence, the longing, the yearning is, itself, God's love working in our hearts, gently and instantly seeking for us, pursuing us, coming after us.

And the second word is even better. It is that because this gentle love is actually God it will not give up, will not abandon us, will not ever cease pursuing us until one day, in our heart of hearts, we say yes to it. Yes to God, yes to our spirituality, yes to our need to love and to be loved. Yes, that is, to our essential nature, and then find ourselves living "For the love of God."

So hear the ancient and good words again:

> "How can I give you up...
> My heart recoils
> My compassion grows warm and tender."

And when the shepherd comes home, he calls his friends and neighbors, saying to them:

> "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

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O God of mysterious love, find us when we are lost, search for us when we stray in dry desert wastes, claim us, redeem us, and bring us home to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.